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The Council Connection

your connection to City Council by Mayor Justin M. Wilson

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Last month, the new City Council got to work. While [the installation ceremony was virtual](#), the challenges and opportunities ahead of us are quite real.

A few weeks following the City Council installation, our new City Manager, Jim Parajon took office replacing Mark Jinks, who began a well-deserved retirement.

Later this month, the City Council will begin the busiest portion of our annual calendar. [The City Manager will present his proposed budget on February 15th, formally commencing our budget process.](#) The budget is scheduled for adoption on May 4th.

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Filled with budget work sessions, community engagement opportunities and deliberations, this is Council's annual opportunity to put its imprint on a budget that provides the services that our community relies upon.

The City Manager's proposed budget will suggest an allocation for the second tranche of the [City's funding from the American Rescue Plan](#) and determine the future of services and programs meant to address the pandemic that has been our reality for the past two years.

Last month I wrote about the onset of the new variant and exponential increases in demand for COVID testing. A month later, the variant that dominated our community so quickly, is now fading just as quickly.

We are still not out of the woods completely, but the trends are positive:

- [The growth of new cases peaked two weeks ago, and has been on a downward trend since then.](#)
- Our 7-day positivity rate peaked just after the New Year and has been dropping ever since. It is now one of the lowest rates in the Commonwealth.
- [After a period of heavy demand on the City's testing centers, appointments for COVID testing is now widely available again.](#)
- When our volume of cases hit new records in the last month, our hospitalizations and deaths did not increase proportionally.
- [You may now order free COVID-19 at-home tests from the Federal Government](#)
- [Last week, unvaccinated Virginians were hospitalized at a rate 21.1 times that of fully vaccinated Virginians.](#)

The goal for our community remains the same: We must vaccinate and boost every eligible resident of our City to protect ourselves, our families, friends and coworkers. [Getting a booster is proven to improve outcomes.](#)

In September, we began administering COVID-19 vaccine boosters for [eligible residents of our City](#). Over 41% of Alexandria's fully vaccinated residents have now received a booster dose.

If you are 16 or older and received the second dose of Pfizer or Moderna or the single dose of Johnson & Johnson you are eligible for a booster dose.

For more information or to sign-up for a booster dose, [please head to our vaccine website](#).

As of yesterday, 129,812 Alexandrians have received at least one vaccine dose, which is 84.4% of the eligible population of those 5 and older.

[Of those, 110,993 Alexandrians are now fully vaccinated.](#)

[ANYONE who is aged 5 or older is eligible to be vaccinated and we have a dose waiting for you.](#)

For those who have already been vaccinated, [you may now download your vaccination record from the Virginia Department of Health](#).

When the Delta variant took hold, [the CDC issued new guidance recommending masks be worn in indoor spaces in communities where transmission is substantial or high](#). Alexandria remains in the "high" level of transmission at this time. All Alexandrians should wear a mask, preferably a [N95, KN95 or KF94](#) when they are inside, or with any crowd outside.

The Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) continues mitigations and efforts to prevent significant spread of the virus within our schools. [Parents can register for free in-school testing](#).

[ACPS continues to publish school by school infection data on a weekly basis.](#)

[The City and the Alexandria City Public Schools have now implemented vaccine mandates for our respective staffs.](#)

The ACT Now COVID-19 Response Fund was re-branded as the Alexandria Resilience Fund, which is distributing money into our community to support the many needs this crisis has created. Please join me in supporting this fundraising effort.

The latest updates will continue to be posted regularly on the City's Coronavirus website.

The Virginia Department of Health posts data daily online regarding positive tests, hospitalizations and deaths.

The Virginia Hospital & Healthcare Association is posting daily updates regarding hospital capacity and capabilities.

I continue my monthly Virtual Town Hall meetings on the first Thursday of each month.

You can watch January's Town Hall online. Join us Thursday evening at 8PM for my February Town Hall.

Volunteers are needed throughout our community. Please refer to Volunteer Alexandria for opportunities to give back to those in need.

We are still actively recruiting volunteers to join our Alexandria Medical Reserve Corps. Medical Reserve Corps volunteers, both with and without medical training, have been critical to our efforts throughout this pandemic.

Contact me anytime. Let me know how I can help.

Initiatives and Updates

Broadband Competition

Last month **the City announced that we have received four proposals from vendors seeking to offer competitive broadband services for our community.** This is a major step in our multi-year effort to bring broadband competition to Alexandria.

The four bidders who have responded to this solicitation are:

- [Lumos Telephone LLC](#)
- [NATC Tower Company](#)
- [Shenandoah Cable Television, LLC \(Shentel\)](#)
- [Ting Fiber, Inc.](#)

The City Council voted unanimously to accept all four proposals and our staff is currently working to return to Council with franchise agreements with one or more of these bidders very soon.

Last year, City Council gathered on Eisenhower Avenue to have a [formal groundbreaking for the build of our municipal fiber network](#). Construction is [now occurring at 5 different locations in the City](#).

[Over 8 years ago, I proposed that the City develop a broadband plan to help bring true competition to Alexandria's broadband market.](#)

It has taken far too long, but the City is finally moving ahead on an effort to bring new broadband capacity to our community.

[Over a year ago, the City issued a revised solicitation to select a vendor to construct a municipal fiber network to serve City and School facilities around our community.](#) Earlier last year, [a contract was awarded to Jones Utilities Construction, Inc to perform this work.](#)

Over 7 years ago, the City issued a Request for Information (RFI). This RFI solicited concepts from the private sector for partnership with the City in expanding broadband options, availability, and capabilities. We received 10 responses from potential private partners and those responses shaped the approach the City is now taking.

For years, Alexandria has sought new private investment in broadband infrastructure. For most of our residents, we have one company providing Internet connectivity and television. Regardless of the performance of incumbent providers, technological innovation and reliability thrives on competition.

This is an issue that impacts not only residents but also our businesses and the ability of our community to attract new investment.

Concurrent with the FY 2017 budget process, the City completed the [initial financial estimates for the first phase of the infrastructure build-out](#). The plan is designed to replace the City's existing connectivity agreement for City facilities with a City-owned fiber network.

By **leveraging E-Rate funding from the FCC**, achieving operating savings from the costs of the existing agreement, and the potential for private leases of our infrastructure, the effort may be able to pay for itself.

One of the core components of the original proposal I made was that the City **adopt a "Dig Once" policy**. Essentially that's a policy that makes the City more efficient by leveraging existing underground infrastructure work to add conduit and other infrastructure at the same time. With hundreds of millions of dollars of sewer and transportation work scheduled over the next decade, we should sequence and combine that work to be the most efficient.

This is an exciting project and one that gives the City the best chance to leverage its assets to bring new broadband services to our residents and businesses.

Fire Department Staffing

On June 30th 2010, the Alexandria Fire Department had an authorized workforce of 252 full-time equivalent (FTE) employees. **Today the authorized workforce is 301.50 employees**. No other City department has experienced that type of workforce growth during that period.

As a result of that investment, we are now making new progress in aligning our Fire Department staffing with the recommendations of the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA).

NFPA is an organization that promulgates standards and codes for usage by local governments. In 2001, the NFPA **published a new standard that detailed the minimum staffing standards for fire apparatus**. Alexandria was the only jurisdiction in our region that maintained less than 4 person minimum staffing.

In the Fall of 2014, the City's then-new Fire Chief **came to the Council with an entirely new model** for cross-trained firefighter-medics. This is the model in use in all of our neighboring jurisdictions.

By cross-training the existing single-mode medics, the belief was that we could achieve appropriate minimum staffing on all engines, ladders and the rescue company in order to meet the NFPA standard.

While the new model has allowed the City to achieve appropriate minimum staffing on many of our fire engine companies, there are still apparatus remaining with minimum staffing not meeting the standard, largely due to staffing turnover.

When the City began the transition to the new staffing model in 2014, we had 64 single-role medics with 10 single-role EMS supervisors. Today we have 19 remaining single-role medics.

In 2012, 2017 and 2018, the City successfully sought grants under the "[Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response](#)" (SAFER) program. This Federal grant program provides support to local governments to expand these critical public safety services.

A SAFER grant covers most of the personnel costs of these positions in the first and second years, and a portion in the third year. At that point, the City becomes responsible for all of the costs going forward.

Last month, [the Council unanimously voted to apply for another SAFER grant for this year](#). This grant is proposed to fund the addition of 20 FTE, which are proposed to support relief positions that will reduce the amount of mandatory overtime that those in the Fire Department must perform to maintain minimum staffing.

This is an important step forward to ensure that Alexandria's residents and their property are protected by fire suppression and emergency medical services which meet minimum standards. This is an investment in the safety of our personnel and our residents.

New Affordable Housing

Just before the pandemic, the City hosted our [2020 Housing Summit](#). The event was designed to draw residents and policy experts from around the region and the nation. The attendees discussed the status of the City's implementation of our [2013 Housing Master Plan](#) along with discussion of our continued housing challenges and the options to address those challenges in the future. It was a thought-provoking session and you can [review the presentations and videos for all of the sessions online](#).

During [my presentation](#) at the beginning of the session, I discussed the City's achievement toward our goal of creating or preserving an additional 2,000 committed affordable units before 2025. Through a variety of efforts, the City had accounted for 1,404 of the 2,000 housing units we are working towards.

Of the 1,404 units 735 of them were created through partnerships with non-profits and the City's housing authority, the Alexandria Redevelopment and Housing Authority. These partnerships have typically utilized [Federal Low-Income Housing Tax Credits \(LIHTC\)](#) and braided several different funding

approaches. Creating housing that remains affordable regardless of often unforgiving market conditions, requires creativity and a little luck.

Over the last three years, the City has achieved the preservation or creation of **just about 1,000 units of committed affordable housing**. The last two months have been very busy on this effort:

- Last month, the City Council unanimously approved a proposal by the **Alexandria Housing Development Corporation (AHDC) to develop 475 committed affordable and workforce units in Arlandria at the corner of Glebe and Mount Vernon**. This is the site of a former Safeway and an office building bought by the City 2 decades ago, demolished and used as a parking lot as an interim use.
- In December, the City Council unanimously approved **a separate proposal by AHDC to develop 36 affordable homeownership units (31 townhomes and 5 condominiums)** and 3 flats to be operated by Sheltered Homes of Alexandria for 12 residents. This project is located on Seminary Road just east of the City's Fire Station.
- This evening, the City's Planning Commission will be considering a proposal by another housing non-profit, **Wesley Housing Development Corporation, to build 373 committed affordable housing units at Parcview on Holmes Run Parkway**. If the Planning Commission makes a recommendation, this project will come before City Council on the 12th of this month.
- Last month, **Wesley Housing used resources from Amazon's Housing Equity Fund and a loan from Housing Partnership Fund, to purchase 66 private units in Arlandria and preserve them as affordable, with future redevelopment plans to come**.

The City will continue to seek creative partnerships, new land-use tools and innovative financing to preserve and create affordability in our City. I am pleased to see these efforts come to fruition.

Stormwater Utility Fee Credits

Between now and February 15th, **residential and commercial property owners can apply for a credit of up to 50% against their annual Stormwater Utility Fee**. Please apply online to receive reductions for the efforts you are taking to improve stormwater handling.

In June of 2018, **property owners in Alexandria paid a Stormwater Utility Fee for the first time ever**. The

creation of this fee was driven by the need for additional revenue to comply with the City's MS4 Permit. The permit reflects Alexandria's obligations to reduce pollutants contained in storm run-off which makes its way to the Chesapeake Bay and other waterways.

Today the fee supports nearly half of a billion dollars of infrastructure, maintenance and operating expenses for water quality and water quantity initiatives over the next decade.

The fee applies to all properties (regardless of their taxable status). For commercial properties, it is assessed based on the impervious surfaces on the property. For residential properties, there are four tiers (apartment, townhome, small single-family home and large single-family home). Currently, the fee is \$78.40 per year for apartments, \$117.60 per year for a townhome, \$280 per year for a small single-family home and \$467.60 per year for a large single-family home. Essentially the fee is structured to be a user fee for the City's stormwater handling.

The fee was created to raise revenue for important flooding remediation and water quality initiatives. When property owners implement best practices to benefit our stormwater systems, it helps the community as a whole. Please make sure you obtain credits for these important efforts.

Alexandria Recovers

Each fall, we have the annual meeting of Visit Alexandria, Alexandria's convention and visitors association. Under normal circumstances, this is the time when we discuss the success of the City's travel and hospitality industry. In 2019, we were noting a record \$859 million of visitor spending, which generated \$27.9 million of local tax receipts, easing the burden on Alexandria's local taxpayers.

In 2020, that visitor spending dropped in half to \$445 million, as the pandemic ravaged our local economy.

- In April of 2019, our local sales tax revenue exceeded \$2.5 million. In April of 2020, it fell to \$2 million.
- In April of 2019, our dining tax revenue was over \$2 million. In April of 2020, it fell to just barely over a half million.
- In April of 2019, our transient lodging (hotel) tax revenue was \$1.4 million. In April of 2020, it fell to less than \$200,000.

Unfortunately, the carnage had very real human impacts. In April of 2020, the Virginia Employment Commission (VEC) reported over 7,000 initial unemployment claims for Alexandria. Most of the employees impacted were those who worked in the travel and hospitality industry.

Yet, we are now coming back:

- Visitor spending is projected to rebound to \$693 million this year.
- In December, there were only 110 initial unemployment claims.
- Sales tax revenue in September (the most recent month available) exceeded \$3 million, significantly higher than the same month in 2019.
- Meals tax revenue has now exceeded 2019 levels for 5 straight months.
- Hotel tax revenue continues to grow every month, but still has a way to go to match where we were in 2019.

It has been the creativity of business leaders around our City, the tireless work of their dedicated employees and the partnership with government that has led our local economy into recovery. We still have work to do, but we have made considerable progress from the dark days of 2020. Our City government will continue our efforts to restore our local economy.



A New Minnie Howard

Last month, **the City Council unanimously approved the redevelopment plans** for the Minnie Howard School, currently the 9th grade campus for Alexandria City High School.

The approval will construct a new facility with 313,355 square feet of space, capacity for 1,600 students, and significant sustainability features **to ensure the building is "NetZero" when it opens.** The project also includes a variety of City facility co-location, with a new pool, a teen wellness center, early-childhood space, and more.

This school year, 15,477 students started in the Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS). That constitutes a decrease of 111 students from the previous year.

While clearly impacted by the pandemic, this is the second year in a row that we have seen a reduction in student enrollment, but it comes on the heels of 13 straight years of enrollment increases. During that period, ACPS added over 5,000 students. The last time we had this **many children attending our schools was nearly 50 years ago in the early 1970s.**

We also see a clear divide emerging in the new post-pandemic enrollment trends, as enrollment in our high school (grades 9 - 12) continues to increase, while enrollment for elementary and middle school students dropped. While both the increase and the decreases were modest, they are potential trends to be watched in the future.

In May, City Council unanimously approved a 10-year capital improvement program for the Alexandria City Public Schools including \$551.5 million over the next decade. This provides the funding for both new and renovated facilities, as well as non-capacity infrastructure investments. Only 8 years ago, **the 10 year capital improvement program for our Schools was less than half as much at \$203 million.**

This 10-year Capital Program includes rebuilds or builds of:

- Cora Kelly Elementary School
- George Mason Elementary School
- Minnie Howard Campus of our High School
- A new school to be determined

Every public school student in Alexandria should learn in a first-class facility. The Minnie Howard project will be a significant investment in the future of education in Alexandria.



George Mason Hotel Reborn

In 1929, the George Mason Hotel opened up at the corner of S. Washington Street and Prince Street in Old Town. Designed by the **architect William Lee Stoddart**, the hotel boasted a toilet in each room!

While the hotel used a few neon signs on the roof to lure guests, in 1971, it shut down for good. The building later became the headquarters of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). The building was sold when NCMEC moved to a new location in the City of Alexandria.

This transition has led to an opportunity to return this building to its original use.

Hotels are the most lucrative land-use for the City of Alexandria and its taxpayers. Hotels generate significant real estate tax, transient lodging (hotel) tax, dining tax, sales tax and Business, Professional and Occupational License (BPOL) tax. In return, hotels consume hardly any services, with no kids in schools, minimal public safety needs and limited impact on transportation networks. No other land-use can match it.

When a private entity explored the concept of converting the old George Mason Hotel back to its original use, the Alexandria Economic Development Partnership (AEDP) went to work.

AEDP identified a state program, the **Tourism Development Financing Program (TDFP)**, administered by the Virginia Tourism Corporation. This program identifies tools to address the needs of gap financing for projects supporting tourism activity.

In this case, a \$69.6 million project was partially financed by its investors, leaving a \$6.1 million gap. Using the TDFP, private loans sought by the hotel developer could be serviced by 3 revenue sources, all ultimately paid by hotel guests:

- The Commonwealth agrees to provide its 1% sales and use tax charged to each hotel guest over 20 years to pay off the debt
- The City agrees to provide its 1% sales and use tax charged to each hotel guest over 20 years to pay off the debt
- The hotel guests will pay a special 5% "access fee" over 20 years to pay off the debt

As the City Council considered this arrangement, concerns were raised by members of Council and labor activists, as to whether additional protections for workers could be included as part of the performance agreement with the hotel.

Last month, City Council voted 4-3 to approve the arrangement, submitting the application to the Virginia Tourism Corporation and including new protections in the performance agreement to support the right of employees to organize with a union if they wish to do so.

The landowners of this property have vested rights under the existing zoning to convert the property to a multi-family residential use (as well as other "by-right" uses). By reverting to the hotel use, this property will generate a net tax return to the City's taxpayers of \$37.6 million over the next 20 years, a return 500% higher than an allowed residential use.

This project will bring back the history use of the building and provide strong economic return for the City's taxpayers.

Station 201 Renovation

When the City Council approved our 10-year Capital Improvement Program during last year's budget process, **it included nearly \$50 million budgeted for investments in our Fire Department's facilities**. In

addition to the budgeted amount, a replacement facility for Station 206 is also included in the Landmark Mall redevelopment.

Each of our fire stations are critical municipal infrastructure, with availability required every day of the year. To complete these facility investments requires disruption and systemic resiliency.

Our oldest fire station will be the target of the next investment. **For over a century, Station 201 has served our City from its Old Town location on Prince Street.**

Starting this month, **the resources from Station 201 will be transferred to other facilities until the Fall, as we work to replace the bay floor, to support the weight of the modern fire apparatus.** This will mean that the personnel living at Station 201 will be moved to Station 209 in Potomac Yard. Station 205, which is the closest to 201 will be allocated an additional paramedic during this time.

The City will be hosting a virtual community meeting at 7 PM this evening to provide more information on these temporary changes. **You can sign-up now to participate.**



Power Plant Redevelopment

Two decades ago, persistent resident activists, led by Elizabeth Chimento and Poul Hertel, began questioning the health impacts of the coal-fired **Potomac River Generating Station, which began operation on Alexandria's waterfront in 1949.**

Eventually, they got the support of the City government, and through years of work, led by my former colleagues Paul Smedberg and Del Pepper, the plant shut down for good a little over 8 years ago.

Now, it's time for what will be next.

Last week, the latest community meeting on the future redevelopment of the site occurred. You can **review the video of the meeting, including the presentation and questions.**

A year ago, **Hilco Redevelopment Partners**, a national entity specializing in the redevelopment of aged industrial sites, **took control of the property with plans to see redevelopment to fruition.**

With the closure of the plant, this site became one of the higher priority sites for redevelopment in the City. As the City's focus on the waterfront has led to new public access, increased open space and new economic

vitality, the power plant site is a critical missing piece as we work to ensure the connection of the northern end of the waterfront.

Fortunately, Hilco is welcomed to Alexandria with an adopted community vision to guide them. In 2017, City Council approved [the Old Town North Small Area Plan](#). This planning document codified a redevelopment vision for the 20-acre power plant site and the area surrounding it.

While the plan was appropriately non-specific about the exact future development of the power plant site, the approved vision details new open space, mixed-use development, sustainable land-use, affordable housing and much more.

This is a critical parcel for the City's future. The community engagement will be key to shaping these applications in the future.

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